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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the disadvantaged state of women in South Africa, including statistics that illustrate effects of their lack of status on their health and well being. It then focuses on the role in South Africa of the community library and information services in empowering especially women. Barriers experienced in information delivery to women are listed, followed by a description of how the Tshwane Community Library and Information Services have come a long way towards breaking these barriers. A list follows of everyday real life problems in which special emphasis is given on disseminating information to women. Emphasis is given on the need for a community network of stakeholders that can help make women aware of the importance of information in their lives, and examples of these community "stakeholders" are given. Educational services that can enable people to teach themselves are identified. Discussion then moves to the establishment and maintenance of a reading and learning culture and issues related to and ideas for outreach activities and programs. (AEF)

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Women, democracy and participation in the information society

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1. INTRODUCTION

She was approximately seventeen years old and about seven months pregnant. A two-year-old toddler was peeping out behind her tattered dress. In a shy whisper she asked me: "Do you perhaps have books with pictures where I can see where babies are coming from." It was at this exact moment that I realised the intensity of the information and education task we as Librarians in post-apartheid South Africa are facing, especially towards the women of this wonderful Country.

This happened four years back. Margaret is currently employed as a councilor specializing in assisting abused women. She attended the Literacy, Sex education and HIV/Aids education classes offered by the Community Library and Information Services. She is a regular visitor to the nearby Municipal Clinic and receives free contraceptives. She was referred by the Library Services to an institution providing Free Legal Aid to abused women and is currently receiving maintenance from the fathers of both her children. Both her children attend all the reading hours, educational activities and holiday programmes offered at their local Library. They are well cared for children, bright and eager to learn.

Margaret told me later that it took all her courage to visit the Community Library and Information Service, as she perceived it as a place only to be visited by the literate and wealthy, but she was desperate to change her life of poverty and ignorance.

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2. WOMEN IN SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIETY

South Africa can easily be one of the countries in the world with the largest percentage of abused and discriminated against women. It is surely also one of the Countries with the bravest and strong-hearted women.

The following statistics speak for themselves:

- One adult woman out of every six in South Africa is currently assaulted by her partner
- Research carried out in Soweto in 1994 found that one in three women attending a clinic for any reason had been battered at some time by her husband or boyfriend
- At least one woman is killed by her partner every six days in South Africa
- One in three girl children will be sexually assaulted before the age of 18, and one in eight boys will be sexually assaulted
- An estimated million women are raped annually in South Africa – approximately one rape every 35 seconds
- More than 60% of the population is illiterate or semi-literate, the majority hereof being women
- The average age at which a girl gives birth is sixteen
- The number of babies born with the HIV/Aids virus has increased with 65% during the last ten years.
- More than 15 million adults are estimated to have HIV/AIDS on the African continent, 64% of the world's total positive population
- Close to 8 million African women are HIV positive, compared with 10 million women infected worldwide
- Female-headed households have 50% higher poverty rate than male-headed households

Women are more vulnerable to abuse, HIV infection and subsequently poverty because of their status in South African Society. The birth of true Democracy in South Africa in 1994 did not mean total democracy for especially the African women. Because women in South Africa, and single mothers in particular, are often economically disadvantaged, their access to health care and information in general is compromised. Distribution points for free condoms such as clinics and schools are lacking in areas where poverty is rife, especially rural areas. Poor women have less access to information and resources that will help them make informed choices in life.

It is however not only economically and political disadvantaged women that are affected by the lack of status. Until recently all women in South African Society were, and still are, marginalized by the mere fact of their sex, both at home and in their careers. Although definite steps are in place to achieve not only racial equity, but also gender equity, there still exist a large degree of gender discrimination against females of all races. Women tend to find themselves clustered in junior, part-time and temporary positions, often without access to technological information and or time to educate themselves or to be trained in information technology.

3. BREAKING BARRIERS: THE ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICE IN SOUTH AFRICA

Community Library and Information Services in South Africa are playing a vital role in empowering especially women by ensuring that they are informed and able to take financial care of themselves. The ongoing circle of poverty, illiteracy and disease can only be broken by getting women to really and actively participating in the information society as the influence of the mother on a child is the only factor really impacting on transforming a society. Policies, legislation, programmes etc can attempt to empower a society, but true participation and empowerment can only come from inside a society and an individual.

Community Libraries in South Africa are increasingly becoming the link between the "uneducated individual" and the information highway. Community Libraries are fulfilling the vital role of addressing community needs on a very basic level, making it less fearful and daunting to access information than on a more formal level.

It is firstly necessary to have a clear view of the barriers preventing easy access for women to information in general:

3.1 Barriers experienced in information delivery to women

- Lack of time
- Lack of financial resources
- Lack of access to training
- Illiteracy
- Technological illiteracy
- Fear of technology
- Crime
- Language barrier
- Lack of telephone and information infrastructure
- Lack of effective channels of communication
- Public Libraries perceived to be a luxury and not a basic right
- Views of women as being intellectually inferior
- Women perceived as having a second-class status
- Lack of self-worth and self trust
- Lack of interest
- Women are unaware of the value of information and knowledge
- Lack of support from partners and families
- Lack of a culture of reading and learning

These are but a few barriers that have to be broken. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the status of the Community Library and Information Service in South Africa is not perceived as to be of great importance. No legislation exists enforcing the rendering of Community Library and Information Services. Budget cuts firstly affects this specific service delivery while demands on the service from the community is ever increasing. Alternative and innovative ways have to be found to address the ever changing and increasing needs of the communities.

Service rendering has to change from being book focussed to finding other ways of information dissemination as the South African currency is plunging drastically. Very limited resources are available to concentrate on empowering women in the information world, as there are always more visible priorities to attend to.

3.2. Finding ways to break barriers

The Tshwane Community Library and Information Services have come a long way towards breaking these barriers. The Library Service has moved, and is still moving rapidly away from the traditional western Library service delivery and is breaking ground in finding a true South African model of service delivery, concentrating on the diverse cultural needs of all citizens in order to satisfy all information needs.

3.2.1. Provision of information services

Special emphasis is given to information dissemenation concentrating on women's needs. This information is available on a basic level and attempts to provide quick and effective answers and guidance with everyday real life problems:

- Survival information
- Business information (entrepreneurial information)
- Legal information
- Community information
- Municipal services
- Career information
- Job opportunities
- Housing opportunities
- Heritage information
- Health issues
- General enquiries
- Information packages
- Research projects

In order to make information accessible to especially women, it is firstly essential to reach the women, to make them aware of the importance of information in their lives. It is not viable to wait for a women to approach the Community Library, as in most cases due to all the reasons listed above and more, she will simply not come. It is therefore very important to form and utilised network of stakeholders and to infiltrated the community on all levels:

Some examples of such stakeholders are:

- Formal and informal educational institutions
- Church groups
- NGO's
- Governmental bodies
- Womans associations
- Shebeens (Local pubs)
- Places of work

3.2.2. Support to Education

Educational services enable people to educate themselves. Services are:

- Educare
- Support to formal education
- Adult-Basic Education
- Provision of study facilities
- Informal education
- Youth services

The Commubnity Library is further putting emphasis on providing support to education. 40% of women in the Greater Tshwane area is illiterate or semi litterate. All attempts are made to allow people to educate themselves. Literacy training, Life skills and Adult Basic Education programmes are offered in partnership with stakeholders, reaching over 2000 learners per month. 89% of these learners are women

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between 30 and 90. These programmes concentrates on entrepreneural empowerment in order to assist the learners to become economically self sustainable and independant from abusive home environments.

3.2.3. The establishment and maintenance of a reading and learning culture

One of the most important barries is the lack of a culture of reading and learning. The verbal tradition in early African society has kept folklore and heritage alive. With Colonisation and the urbanilisation, this verbal transition from the elderly in the community is ending. With no access to books and other information material especially in rural areas, a very limited culture of reading exist. The access to television and computers in the urban areaas futher enhances this problem. The youth therefore has no sense of self education and the value of information. Linked to the tendency that females are undereducated, this leads to a real problem as women are not able to install a culture of reading and learning in their children.
Regular awareness programmes like marches for literacy are initiated. During 2001 a total of more than 30 000 people were involved this way. Reading circles and programmes exists not only for children, but also for elderly and illiterate women. Books on tape are increasingly popular were a group of women get togehtr to listen to these tapes while they are tought knitting or crocheing.

3.2.4. Outreach activities and programmes

The following key areas should be kept in mind when outreach activities are rendered and programmes are presented:

- All activities and programmes should be presented as fun and non threatening.
- The Libraries itself should be as undaunting as possible.
- The status and dignity of the most uneducated and poor participant should maintained at all times.
- Provision should always be made for child care
- Access to activities should be easy (financially and physically.)
- Time constraints should be taken into account
- Level of entrance should be relevant to the average litteracy rate and economic environment of the immediate community

The following very succesfull regular programmes are currently in place, reaching approximately 20 000 women on a monthly basis :

- Born to Read programme
- Basic and advanced literacy training
- Entrepreneurial activities and training
- Cultural development activities
- Interest groups for teenage mothers and mothers to be
- Extensive HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns
- Reading circles for aged women
- Feeding programmes
- Counsilling in women related matters with stakeholders
- Practical instructions on various projects
- Exhibitions on relevant topics
- Skills workshops

In all cases the empahsis is on easy and relaxed way of self education. Only when the women are comfortable with accesing basic information and attending regular sessions, attempts are made into

progressing into a more advance stage of formal access to ICT. Computer classes, providing friendly access are offered by way of public private partnerships. Lack of funding for virtual villages are however extremely limited and this stille poses as one of the major barriers into empowering women and the whole community in information technology.

4. CONCLUSION

South Africa has just celebrated eight years of democracy and freedom on 27 April 2002. The Country has come a long way, but women have still not found true democracy and independency. As long as every newspaper daily reports on rape of women and children, AIDS deaths etc. etc. this country will not be truly democratic. As long as women are forbidden by their partners to use contraceptives, as long as women do not know where babies coming from because they are denied access to basic information, women will not be truly citizens of this country.

The women of South Africa are however strong. Women of all races are standing together, utilizing all the opportunities coming their way in order to ensure that their children have that have been denied to them for a very long time, that is the power of being informed.

The Tshwane Community Library and Information Service is committed towards empowering women and the children of this Country by providing access to information and teaching women the power and joy of being informed.

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